DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 646 TM 021 059

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TITLE Children's Attitudes Towards School Reform: A Focus on Kentucky.
PUB DATE Nov 93
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (19th, New Orleans, LA, November 10-12, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Ability Grouping; Age Grade Placement; *Cooperative Learning; *Educational Change; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; Grade 3; Grade 4; Likert Scales; *Nongraded Instructional Grouping; Questionnaires; *Student Attitudes; Teaching Methods; Team Teaching; Thematic Approach
IDENTIFIERS *Kentucky; Kentucky Education Reform Act 1990; *Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

The attitudes of students in ungraded primary and fourth grade classes toward educational-reform changes implemented in their classrooms were studied in Kentucky, using a sample of 53 students from the primary grades and 47 students from the fourth grade. Multi-age, multi-ability grouping, as experienced by these primary students, is a feature of changes under the Kentucky Educational Reform Act. These students were in a transitional phase, being involved in such groups for part of each day. Questionnaires requiring Likert-type responses were administered to these students. Responses suggest that students are accepting changes and seem to be adapting to teaching using the thematic approach, which emphasizes cooperative learning. Students in grade 4 preferred working by themselves more than the primary-grades group, though both groups accepted cooperative learning. Teachers are moving to more hands-on activities and are becoming more creative in the use of low-budget materials for projects. Two tables present student responses. (Contains 15 references.) (SLD)

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ED 366 646

CHILDRENS ATTITUDES TOWARDS SCHOOL REFORM: A FOCUS ON KENTUCKY

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MidSouth Educational Research Association Conference

New Orleans, Louisiana

November, 1993,

TM021059

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Introduction

Recipes for school reform in the United states have included ingredients such as regimentation, routinazation, and regulation of learning Futrell (1989). Teachers generally show enthusiasm for school reform, but commentaries on the public's resistance to school change at the national and state levels appear to be increasing (Harp, 1993, Barth,1993, Eakman, 1993). However, the reactions of children to educational change processes ignited by school reform has received very little attention.

Purpose of study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the attitudes of (third) primary and (fourth) intermediate grade students towards some of the changes taking place in their classrooms. The primary students had been taught in the traditional way for two years; their involvement in the ungraded primary is limited to spending one hour per day in the multi-age/multi-ability grouping. The fourth graders have been assessed in the old way for three years and are learning to do group activities and portfolio creation for the new assessment at the end of the school year. The survey will determine predispositions towards classroom changes taking place in a transitional period of school reform.

The commonwealth of Kentucky instituted a comprehensive school reform program under the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (Legislative Research Commission,1990), including an ungraded primary school program (grades K-three), and fourth grade assessments. The Act brought about changes in areas such

as curriculum, accountability, assessment, and the primary program (Kentucky Department of Education, 1991). Kentucky's primary program replaced the traditional kindergarten, first, second, and third grades.

Students will be combined into multi-age, multi-ability groups (Connell,1987,Cohen,1990, Cushman,1990). Multi-age and multi-ability grouping will allow faster developing students to move ahead while helping slower-paced students to work with others at their own level in a non-threatening atmosphere. Each family of students will stay with the same teacher or team of teachers for approximately four years.

Some students may complete the program in three years while some will do so in five. The curriculum will change from a basal textbook system to a system using thematic units which allow teaching across the curriculum. Wakefield (1990), believed that the role of the teacher in the ungraded primary is to help children to figure things out for themselves.

Subjects

The subjects were 100 elementary school students in Clark County Kentucky. Fifty-three were randomly selected from three primary grade classes in Becknerville and Central elementary schools respectively, and 47 were randomly selected from two fourth grade classes from these schools. Both schools are in the Clark County Kentucky school district. Demographic information was collected on parents ages, ethnicity, occupations, and education.

Survey Procedure

Two separate but identical questionnaires requiring Likert-Scale responses were administered to the primary (third) and (intermediate) fourth grade students respectively. The questionnaire collected demographic information on parents age, education, and occupation. Other questions surveyed attitudes towards new teaching practices, group and cooperative learning, portfolio development, and general attitudes towards the new changes. Content validity of the questionnaire was assured because the questions related directly to best practices suggested by the Kentucky Department of Education.

RESULTS

Parents Demographics

The mean age of the parents was 35. Seventy-nine percent were Caucasian, two percent African-American, two percent bi-racial, one percent Mexican and one percent Native-American. Fifteen percent did not respond to the question. Occupations of parents most commonly listed were farmer, doctor of medicine, business owner,nurse, and teacher. About thirty-four percent of the parents attended college and 40 graduated from high school.

Primary

The two primary classrooms from which subjects were selected were implementing the program partially in the 1992-93 school year. Both classes spent an average of one hour per day in the multi-age groupings. The hour was spent teaching subjects such as Social Studies, Reading, Calendar/Math activities and

Science.

Positive responses (very much, to some extent, and slightly) are combined by percent in Table 1. Ninety-two percent of the students enjoyed working in groups with others (cooperatively). Fifty-nine percent preferred to work by themselves. Eighty-three percent liked to receive help from other students while eighty percent liked helping other students. Sixty-two percent preferred to work from textbooks while seventy-four percent preferred to "discover" in groups. Sixty-nine percent preferred the teacher telling them what to do and seventy percent enjoyed hands-on activities. Eighty-five percent enjoyed having children of different ages in their classes. Fifty-six percent said that they liked school better this year while fifty-three percent said that they liked school better last year.

Intermediate

The method used for reporting the responses to the survey for this group is the same as the one used for the primary group. Item responses are reported in Table 2. The intermediate class was required to create writing and mathematics portfolios in the 1992-93 school year. Eighty-seven percent enjoyed working on the writing portfolios but only forty-eight percent liked preparing the mathematics portfolios. Eighty-eight percent thought that they were prepared for the fourth year assessments. The intermediate group preferred to work by themselves more (59%) than did the primary group (49%). The intermediate group also enjoyed hands-on activities more (75%) than did the primary

group(70%). The other intermediate responses matched those given by the primary group item for item.

Discussion

The subjects in this survey were in a transitional period of change from a traditional grade-school system to a new primary school program and had limited participation in the program. This study will be useful when compared to similar future studies which aim at determining students attitudes towards school reform under full implementation of the primary program. The responses to the study appear to suggest that children are initially accepting the changes that are taking place in their classrooms.

They seem to be adapting to teaching (under KERA) using the thematic approach and in which more cooperative learning is featured. Teachers are also moving from a reliance on single texts and workbooks to more hands-on activities, using multiple texts, computers, maps, straws, unifex cubes and various science materials. Teachers are becoming more creative in the use of low-cost materials for primary school projects and many spend their own money to buy these materials.

Although a high level of teacher cooperation in implementing KERA has been observed, teachers are operating under states of anxiety and stress. KERA's timetable has been fastpaced and teachers need more time and help, and better training Lucke (1991). Teachers reflections and action-research on the process of school reform are needed and will provide meaningful perspectives on the progress of learning of individual students.

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Table 1.
Primary Students Responses to Questions on the Kentucky Primary Program By Percent . N=53

Response	Very much	To Some Extent	Don't Know	Slightly	Not At all	No
Enjoy working cooperatively.	60	28	8	4	0	0
Prefer to work by myself.	17	23	4	19	21	16
Like to receive help from other students.	34	26	6	23	9	2
Like to help other students.	65	21	1	4	8	0
Prefer to work from textbooks.	36	13	8	13	3	27
Prefer to discover" in groups.	49	24	14	1	3	9
Prefer teacher to tell me what I should know.	26	28	23	15	8	0
Enjoy hands-on activities.	58	9	15	3	9	6
Enjoy having children of different ages in class.	49	23	11	13	4	0
Like school better this year.	43	2	21	11	23	0
Like school better last year.	36	6	28	11	19	0

Table 2.
Intermediate Students Responses to Questions on the Kentucky Primary Program By Percent . N=47

Response	Very much	To Some Extent	Don't Know	Slightly	Not at all	No
Enjoy working cooperatively.	60	28	8	4	0	0
Prefer to work by myself.	17	23	4	3	21	5
Like to receive help from other students.	34	26	6	23	9	2
Like to help other students.	65	21	1	4	8	0
Prefer to work from textbooks.	36	13	8	13	3	27
Prefer to discover" in groups.	49	24	14	1	3	9
Prefer teacher to tell me what I should know.	26	28	23	15	8	0
Enjoy hands-on activities.	51	13	15	9	9	3
Like school better this year.	43	2	21	11	23	0
Like school better last year.	36	6	28	11	19	0
Enjoyed working on writing portfolios.*	64	17	2	6	10	1
Enjoyed working on mathematics portfolios.*	23	21	31	4	19	2
Well Prepared for fourth grade assessments.*	53	25	6	10	4	2

* Specific questions relevant to the intermediate grade.